

Inclusion, Measurement and Relevance.... And COVID-19

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Introduction

This paper addresses the theme of ‘widening student access, participation and lifelong learning’ within the wider issue of ‘measuring excellence’ in UK higher education and finds them both to be problematic. An earlier paper entitled ‘Inclusion in an age of mobility’ (Traxler 2016) written over four years ago made the case that the inclusion agenda of UK higher education of 1990s was largely a failure in its own terms but had in any case been made irrelevant by the subsequent onset of pervasive and ubiquitous connectivity and mobility, profoundly transforming the production, ownership, distribution and nature of learning and knowing and problematising the role and status of universities and lecturers.

The rhetorical twist was to argue that, yes, *inclusion* was necessary but no longer the inclusion of people from the outside world selectively invited into the higher education system but the inclusion of the higher education system into the world outside. A different rhetoric twist went un-noticed, that of the demise of *social mobility* alongside the increasing mobility of people and societies.

The current paper takes this discussion forward, asking what has changed and by how much. It addresses the emergence of the idea of the Fourth Industrial Revolution, the *hollowing out of the labour market* and other contextual concerns; it addresses the changed financial, regulatory and political environment of UK higher education, and how this has driven the need to measure and compare; and it addresses the interplay between the two, but in the continued context of mobility and connectedness. The discussion is however overtaken firstly by Brexit and then completely overtaken by the COVID-19 pandemic. At this stage, in the middle of the current crisis and possibly lacking a stable historical per-

spective, we could nevertheless ask, will the *mobilities* or *postdigital* perspectives, two emerging but perhaps competing world views, still have any meaning or significance, or is it in the process of being swamped by the pandemic?

Inclusion in an age of mobility

The first part of an earlier case (Traxler 2016) rested on the contention that in unequal societies, the only consequence of inclusion, participation and opportunity was to reinforce inequality and exclusion, taking students from the bottom of the socio-economic pyramid, putting them through the least prestigious universities, saddling them with debt and putting them, now basically indentured, back at the bottom of the pyramid, but now able when necessary to service the existing but unequal economic order. This seemed, from European and American official and academic perspectives and sources, to be a largely uncontentious assertion.

The policies, in their various instantiations, could be seen as the consequence of the centre-left thinking that pervaded public policy in the 1990s. Their failures could probably be ascribed to the aspiration to make major changes in society through only minor changes in education, without the necessary changes anywhere else in the political, social and economic ordering of society.

The second part of the case was the contention that universities were still, in the 2000s, perfecting and deploying the educational technologies of the 1990s, that students' digital lives before, after and alongside university were increasingly divergent from their digital lives within universities, and that the need was not for students to better included in the world of universities but for universities to be better included in the world of students... and better included in the rest of the world.

The earlier paper did not address the issue of excellence, what it might mean and how it might be measured. The earlier paper did however question the purpose of education and without some clear notion of this purpose, it is difficult to define the nature of excellence or specify how it might be measured. Of course, this was always going to be a tricky and contentious topic, some students, parents and employers having perhaps rather different ideas from others, those in some disciplines having

rather different ideas from those in others, some on the political or economic left having different ideas from those on the right and different universities and departments having different ideas about their mission and market to others. So, perhaps vagueness was always likely to be the safe option.

In relation to the specific questions of measurement being addressed here, clearly our earlier analysis breaks into two perspectives, the first, inward-looking, the second, outward-looking.

The first perspective is universities pursuing their various implementations of inclusion, opportunity and participation. Being institutional agendas, they are, by their nature, bound to be measurable, to have come into being with targets, outcomes and KPIs, key performance indicators, already formed around them and to have professionals and departments tasked with shaping the delivery of these agendas in ways specifically crafted to deliver these targets, outcomes and KPIs. One could almost cynically suggest that this is how policy usually mutates into strategy and how professionals and departments *game* the system.

Our second perspective is of universities being left behind by an ever more mobile world. This is, by its nature, a world of change and of mess, perhaps a world of *mobility*, one needing the new ‘mobile empirical’ (Büscher and Urry, 2009) when it finally arrives, and of ‘liquid modernity’ (Bauman 2000). This might excuse our inability to measure. It is a world irreducible to quantity and number, but this only draws attention to the discrepancy between the world of movement, and those static institutions of government that try to manage and control it.

Finally, we ought to pick up our remark about ‘the rest of the world’. It means in this context, the Global South and the Third and Fourth Worlds (Donner 2010). These were however beyond the scope of the original paper. Given the impact of globalisation, especially as underpinned by global digital connectedness, this has become undoubtedly an error and an omission, but still perhaps beyond the scope of any kind of measurement as currently conceived. Perhaps the global COVID-19 pandemic will reconfigure our understanding of these classifications, as for example, different economies, sectors and businesses recover – or not – differentially.

What Has Changed / Is Changing?

Since the earlier paper, we have seen the emergence and consolidation of earlier economic, social, ecological, academic, technological and political trends and trajectories, both locally and globally. These all impact on the nature and need for inclusion, perhaps for the inclusion of, say, non-traditional students within the higher education but more so for the inclusion of the sector itself within the communities of non-traditional students.

The **technological** trends that were perhaps discrete were artificial intelligence (AI), the Internet of Things (IoT), robotics and performance support, are now subsumed, branded and often lauded uncritically as the Fourth Industrial Revolution. The literature seems sometimes upbeat, underpinned by technological determinism, and perhaps naïve, in its attempts at forecasting and predicting positive change, but not always (Peters, Jandrić, & Means, 2019). This is part of what has been characterised and criticised as *megatrends* and *futures thinking*, (Slaughter 1993; Hajkiewicz 2015; Gidley 2010). In terms of our discussions of inclusion, there is now a need to analyse, synthesise and reconcile the world views based around such megatrends and the world views we described based around mobility and connectedness, which may themselves constitute a megatrend. Such analysis and synthesis would undoubtedly argue for a higher education sector that sought to be adapted and ‘included’ in the world of such trends. Higher education has, however, currently got other things on its collective mind during the current pandemic.

The **political** trends that have been pushed to the foreground are populism, nationalism, and neo-liberalism, alongside the erosion of liberalism and internationalism. These trends were all latent at the time of the earlier work and their emergence has only strengthened the need for a higher education sector engaged and ‘included’ in its society. A further emerging trend in the global political discourse is the rise of post-truth, alt-facts and fake-news alongside the denigration of expertise – expertise being of course sadly the major output or value added of the higher education sector globally. This perhaps underlines the argument for the sector engaging as actively and critically as possible, for the ‘inclusion’ we described earlier, with those communities outside the world of higher education.

It would however be naïve for anyone writing from a British perspective to ignore Brexit but, on the other hand, ambitious of them to predict the outcomes and consequences of it. Brexit will clearly radically change

the nature of the UK economy, in for example its trading partners, its industrial capacity and its products and services. This will impact different regions and countries and different classes and demographics of the UK differently and thus impact the nature and purpose of the education system supporting the economy. Political change will, as ever, determine the nature of access to education. The UK's democratically determined and democratically managed withdrawal from the EU continues to be worrying. What has been more worrying has been the extent to which the process has strengthened the extremes in British politics, both in terms of policies and behaviour, at the expense of constitutional processes and any tradition of moderation and respect.

Sadly, at the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic has overtaken Brexit as the determinant of national and global social and economic behaviours. This is as yet barely documented (Ayittey *et al* 2020, Hafiz *et al* 2020, Barro *et al* 2020) and is certainly not over. The competitive nature of global academia does however ensure that the dearth of research papers will not last long. Any expectation that higher education will resume its place and its role in some new normalcy - the so-called *new normal* - could be widely misplaced, and any of the factors or trends we describe and analyse here may subsequently have no meaning at all. In the midst of the crisis, we see higher education making an unplanned lurch into home-working and online learning but we also see, for example, nursing, medical and para-medical students rushed into the frontline, trainee teachers losing their work placements, assessments and exams reconfigured, recruitment targets and caps invalidated, casualised staff laid off and in research, we see projects suspended, fieldwork rejigged, conferences postponed, funding calls deferred and publications delayed.

The new normalcy, when it finally happens, will be influenced by the wider context, for example by an impending recession and changed labour market needs, and by assimilating the lessons to be learnt from wholly online teaching and remote working. In the current context, the impact of inclusion, in both the senses used in our discussion, will be significantly changed and the institutional and national willingness and capacity to measure and understand inclusion will be transformed.

The **economic** trends, insofar as they are independent of technological, social and demographic trends, have been of continued globalisation and increasing trade wars (Dicken 2003; Shangquan 2000; Meyer 2007). However, the current pandemic has suddenly taken centre stage. In the UK, and in much of the global North, unprecedented numbers of people

and companies are seeking the support of a dramatically reduced tax-base; small businesses and large business are mostly closed except for those with an online presence currently buckling under the pressure of inflated, fluctuating and distorted demands (Barua 2020).

Many businesses, those still open, have exploded with demand and then imploded with staff illness and supply chain issues. So much of the retail sector is suffering, either from no customers or from too many, whilst tourism, hospitality, catering and transport, and many of the industries upstream like public transport and motor trades are also affected significantly. Banking and the financial sector are in unprecedented times. They are forced to provide loan, mortgage and interest holidays, and must play a major role in re-inflating economies once the pandemic recedes assuming governments have the appetite and resources for the necessary ‘quantitative easing’ (Fokas *et al* 2020). Public sector borrowing must in many, many countries grow dramatically and with it the costs of servicing public debt.

The continued emergence of the BRICs, especially China and its growing economic influence in Africa (Salisu & Akanni 2020), is now more uncertain especially as these countries all have large and relatively poor populations, and, in particular, China suffers from being the source of the current pandemic (and from being demonised for it in some quarters). On the other hand, Europe and its economies, has also been hard hit by the pandemic, as too has that of the USA, and clearly the global disposition of the regions and their alignment will not be unchanged.

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, the university sector was not in good shape (Drayton & Waltmann 2020). In the UK, and perhaps elsewhere, political trends have been reflected in the university sector by the transition from a dependence on government funding to a dependence on student fee income and thus on market forces. These forces are strongly influenced by league tables and by the public perceptions of the sector both as a means to an end, that is to successful entry to the jobs market, and an end in its own right, the idea of education as a public good.

It is also a ticking time-bomb, to use the media metaphor, financially as the student loans are accounted as ‘loans’ in government book-keeping, meaning they will get paid back, whereas 48% are a ‘debt’, meaning they will not get paid back, creating a hole, another metaphor, in public finance that currently approaches over £10bn¹.

¹ “...the Office for National Statistics (ONS) has stated that its new accounting method for student loans would add over £10bn (specifically £10.6bn) to the UK government 2018 to 2019

This is reflected in the *gig economy* (Kuhn 2016) and in the case of universities to what was referred to as *casualization* (Thorkelson 2016). The removal of any statutory retirement age may have further ossified the system as a viable career path leading to senior staff staying in the system with senior salaries.

The **social** trends are perhaps reflected in recent attempts at (re)classifications of social class that reflect the changes experiences and expectations of, for example, the British population. Gone are the days of a linear and stable structure characterised by A, B, C1 etc (Rose & Harrison 2014) and instead we see the emergence of *precarity* (Quinlan 2016) based around zero-hours contracts, casualisation and the gig economy. This changed ordering of society may be reflected in the emergence newer categorisations like the ones that include a Precariat and a Technical Middle Class, in the Great British Class Survey of 2013 (Savage et al 2013). Again, we can expect Brexit but now also the COVID-19 pandemic to change the social and economic composition of many countries, and further destabilise the notion of ‘inclusion’.

In a rather different sense, the earlier analysis and critique of higher education and inclusion lent on an account of society strongly influenced by the emerging ‘mobilities turn’ in sociology (Sheller 2017), a perspective asserting that social science were philosophically and methodologically rooted in stasis whilst the world around us was no longer rooted, it was in motion. Movement, transience, change and turbulence were everywhere, encompassing both the large-scale movements of people, objects, capital, and information across the world, as well as more local processes of daily transportation, movement through public space, and the travel of material things within everyday life (Urry, 2007). Not at the moment, not with the world of pandemic in lockdown - the balance between, say, the movement of ideas, people, goods and capital has been dramatically curtailed and transformed and will not spring back to the *status quo ante* when the all-clear sirens finally sounds.

The **academic** trends are corporatism/privatisation, managerialism, globalisation, digital industrialisation and consumerism (Williams 2012); these are perhaps only a reflection and microcosm of global trends in the overall political context we briefly describe above but we should explore the dynamic between the Fourth Industrial Revolution (Schwab 2017) in the wider world and its instantiation in the academic one, where

deficit.” from <https://labourlist.org/2019/06/uk-student-loans-expected-to-add-10bn-to-uk-debt/> at 19 August 2019

human labour is replaced by technological input, the capacity for critical stances is algorithmically reduced and technology is used to industrialise the production of intellectual capital. Understandably, even the Fourth Industrial Revolution, *aka* Industry4.0, is now subject to the impact of COVID-19 (Javaid *et al* 2020).

As we said, we are writing in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-2020 and some analysts would see this as an extreme example of the convergence of some global trends, specifically increasing urbanisation, promoting the faster spread of infection, environmental degradation, causing the increased mutation of diseases and the rise of populism, with its assaults on the funding of public health services and on international cooperation, and its preference for conspiracy theory over scientific fact. Other analysts may see the COVID-19 pandemic in the bigger picture as basically spontaneous or random, having only local bacteriological causes. Earlier work (Traxler & Lally 2015) had looked at a convergence of global crises, the environmental, the economic, the political for example, and asked whether within higher education, digital learning was somehow complicit or at the very least compliant and acquiescent in servicing the global forces that underly these crises. Bringing this question forward to the present and generalising slightly, if COVID-19 is not merely a bacteriological blip but in fact symptomatic of the global malaise – no pun intended – we should ask about the role of higher education. Is it complicit or compliant and uncritical of those same global forces, has it endorsed some of the forces propelling and propagating the pandemic, however peripherally?

In the UK, the sector is still beset structurally by uncertainty and volatility around policy and finance from central government, by debates trying to reconcile excellence with access, socially progressive fee structures for students with reduction of the tax burden, *jobs-ready* graduates (Culkin & Mallick 2011) with *life-long learning*, hard subject knowledge with transferable soft skills (Beckingham 2018; Belwal *et al* 2017) and these all within a public relations context featuring grade inflation (Bachan 2017), vice chancellor salaries (Walker *et al* 2019), faulty overseas investments (Altbach 2013; Wilkins & Huisman 2012), diploma mills (Noble 1998) and endemic plagiarism (Park 2003), lecturer stress and poor mental health (Berry & Cassidy 2013), poor governance and NDAs obscuring harassment, and other irregularities. These are not ran-

dom or disconnected but are the synergy between the managerialist culture engendered by neo-liberal government attitudes and the press prepared, indeed keen, to print it.

The earlier paper stressed the widening gulf between people's digital experiences outside higher education and students' digital experiences within higher education; this has gone unchecked and unchanged.

At a deeper level the *hollowing out of the labour market*, the widening chasm that eventually leaves only the extremes of brain surgeon and street cleaner as indicative employment options (McIntosh 2013), presents a bigger and bigger challenge for any pretensions of social mobility and problematises the role of higher education, and its purpose (Bass 1997). If it is not producing rounded individuals nor no longer finding them jobs what is exactly is education *for*? So, hovering above any discussion of inclusion and the relationships between those targeted for 'inclusion' and the higher education sector doing the 'inclusion' is this question, what exactly is education *for*? And how is it to be measured (Biesta 2009)

Clearly, during and after the current pandemic, there is likely to be a major restructuring of the labour markets of many sectors, countries and regions. The current pandemic might provide some insights into the capacity of education to give people the resilience and resources to survive extraordinary pressures and stresses and perhaps these insights might still be preserved after the pandemic, as labour markets restructure and education is needed, not only to supply a changed labour markets but one offering many people little chance of entering those labour markets. Clearly, these various roles for education create competing definitions of inclusion downstream of our earlier dichotomy and problematise the nature of relevance and the meaning of measurement. Much of this has still to be researched, analysed and published by scholars.

This is, so far, a largely Euro-centric account. How does it resonate or resound elsewhere? This is clearly an important question but not one for the current discussion.

Reconciling Inclusion, Measurement and Relevance

Having outlined the contextual issues, we must however return to the question implied in the triad of our title, namely Inclusion, Measurement and Relevance, and ask, how is their implied place and relationship in the earlier analysis changed in the intervening five years. Should our

analysis of the changes in the world since the earlier paper be reflect in what constitutes inclusion and how it can be measured? On balance, the two parts of our earlier argument are underlined and reinforced but more recently for the British, Brexit has intervened, and then much more recently for the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has intervened, both of these threatening to overturn a world of steady change and stable argument. Firstly, any kind of social mobility and the agendas of inclusion, participation and opportunity are ever more problematic and challenged; progressively better measurement might only reveal this. Secondly, movement, fluidity and change - but now massive instability - are ever more pervasive and ubiquitous in our world, and that our capacity to understand, let alone measure, these and their relationship to equity and education will be poorly understood for months and years to come. The *postdigital* and the *mobilities turn* might just be collateral damage.

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